DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 284 FL 016 545

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TITLE C.C. Fries/Michigan Oral Approach Revisited.
PUB DATE 2 Apr 86
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at a conference of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (Brighton, England, April 1-4, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Collected Works - Conference Proceedings (021) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audiolingual Methods; Audiolingual Skills; Communication Skills; Comparative Analysis; Conference Proceedings; Educational History; Educational Theories; *English (Second Language); *Intensive Language Courses; Learning Theories; Linguistic Theory; *Oral Language; Research Needs; Second Language Instruction; *Structural Linguistics; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Fries (C C); University of Michigan

ABSTRACT

A symposium of language learning specialists reviewing C.C. Fries' Oral Approach to English language instruction developed and used at the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan is summarized. The thesis of the symposium was that the basic Oral Approach concepts had and continue to have a profound and far-reaching, though largely unacknowledged, effect on the teaching and learning of English as a second language. Participants examined Fries' underlying assumptions, focused on the intensive course that has emerged at Michigan, and compared it with contemporary methodologies to identify the influence of the basic concepts. The Oral Approach has been extended in many directions, but has also been confused with concepts and points of view that are really antithetical to its fundamental principles. More extensive empirical analysis of the approach's effectiveness is recommended. (MSE)

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C.C. Fries/Michigan Oral Approach Revisited*

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Not many years ago, two or three decades, an expression that was very fashionable at every conference was, "Let's not throw the baby out with the bath water." Babies change, but the desire and tendency to give things a thorough scrubbing every so often, not to mention the pleasure of doing so, never seems to lessen. In this respect, perhaps this report should be entitled: "Where's the baby?"

As one peruses recent literature, particularly in the States, the most popular whipping boy, at least until very recently, when a competitor stepped hesitantly onto the stage, was quite justifiably audiolingualism -- and all the bad images that even mention of that word conjures up, as if the mere mention of it would raise spirits of such terrible instructional practices as habit formation, mechanical drilling, parroting, and so forth, that have been condemned to wherever such practices are supposed to go.

And yet, just a few decades ago those same practices were being hailed as THE WAY to achieve successful learning, THE WAY to raise students to the promising haven of fluency, THE WAY to deliver them from the destitution of monolingualism.

Who, and what, is one to believe?

*Report on "The Oral Approach of C.C. Fries: Concepts and Influences", TESOL Summer Meeting Symposium, Georgetown University, July 1985 read at 20th IATEFL Conference, Brighton, England, April 2, 1986.

A persistent thought that keeps nagging from behind the literature and discussions is: Are we as professionals in our field really so capricious that we cannot make up our minds what is good and what is not? Are classroom teachers, for example, so naive that they switch from one extreme to another, even though they are forced to be pragmatic and practical as soon as they step into a classroom and face rows of upturned, expectant (some perhaps not so expectant) faces? Are the learned scholars of our profession, those who provide the theoretical statements, profound hypotheses, and illuminating guidelines that attract our attention and excite our imagination, subject merely to impulsive whims? Might the problem lie with those of us inclined toward experimentation, observing results, formulating insights, and drafting statements of conclusive proof that something is indeed so, or indeed is not so; those of us somewhere in-between the teacher and the scholar who seemingly proclaim and disclaim competing "gospels" at the drop of a hat? Or could something more sinister be afoot -- a "conspiracy" between socio-economic forces and educational systems, between publishers and "publish or perish" pressures that keeps us switching allegiances and commitments to enlightening theories and grand ideas?

A couple of years ago, one of my colleagues from Michigan, Bill Norris, and I met at the TESOL Convention in Houston and were chatting, not about missing babies or philosophical questions, but something much more prosaic. As far as we were concerned, all the audio-lingual controversies were about something other than EFL teaching at Michigan, other than the Intensive English Course based on Fries' Oral Approach,

which is still found in the green ENGLISH SENTENCE STRUCTURE, red PATTERN PRACTICE, blue VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT, and yellow PRONUNCIATION books, and which has been used at Michigan for just a few years under half a century. Instead we felt inclined to reminisce, an affliction which conferences somehow seem to encourage, and "observed" (in rigorous empirical fashion) that as many of our generation might not be around much longer, we ought to get together one more time to share thoughts. This profound "finding" developed into a symposium; and by a very fortuitous coincidence Norris' institution, Georgetown University, and the home of others of our group: Lado, Bosco, the Kreidlers, was organizing a splendid program of Summer TESOL and linguistic institutes, conferences, meetings, special speakers, etc., which meant that quite a number of old friends would probably be there. The results are this report.

The Georgetown symposium focused only on Fries' Oral Approach in the United States, more specifically only at the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan. What the speakers presented constitutes a baseline for this particular approach to English language instruction. Efforts and experiments to transplant the Oral Approach to other institutions and elsewhere in the world were alluded to but not discussed.

Very briefly, the <u>purpose</u> of the symposium was as follows:

THESIS: C.C. Fries' basic Oral Approach concepts had and continue to have a profound and far-reaching, though largely unacknowledged, effect on EFL teaching and learning.

FORMAT: The symposium examined Fries' underlying assumptions, focused on the intensive course which emerged at Michigan, and compared it with contemporary methodologies in order to identify the influence of Fries' basic language learning concepts, some currently unacknowledged and offered in different terminologies; e.g., the concept "communicative."

ORGANIZATION: The symposium consisted of three sets of ten-minute papers: Setting, Concepts, and Methodologies in Contrast.

In the Setting papers, William Moulton focused on language teaching methodologies on the eve of World War II, Edward Anthony examined the assumptions underlying the approach proposed by C.C. Fries, Peter Fries examined Fries' view of psychology, and William Norris outlined the innovative nature of the intensive English course developed at Michigan.

In the Concepts papers, Betty Robinett focused on what the Oral Approach was in practice by examining its "total functional language environment", Fred Bosco focused on methods and materials for grammar and pattern practice, and Jeris Strain focused on methods and materials for vocabulary. These papers also highlighted essential features of the Oral Approach which were often ignored or lost in efforts to transplant the approach elsewhere.

In the Methodologies in Contrast papers, Joan Morley focused on how the teaching/learning concepts of the Oral Approach have evolved and continue to evolve at Michigan, Russell Campbell focused on the Immersion Model and posed questions regarding possible application of

Oral Approach principles, and Joyce Zuck compared the Communicative and Functional Models with the Oral Approach.

Restated, the main questions addressed by the symposium were: What are the concepts underlying Fries' Oral Approach at the level of both theory and application? What impact has the Oral Approach had on EFL teaching and learning? And how do those concepts differ from the ones considered common lore today?

Issues

At the level of theory perhaps the most common misconception prevalent today is that the Oral Approach was mechanistic or behaviorist. Note we are talking not about Audio-lingualism, but about the Oral Approach. Perhaps one of the most basic problems is that these two have been lumped together and distinctions between them blurred.

Peter Fries addressed the mechanistic/behaviorist misconception and argued that C.C. Fries' Oral Approach was neither. In fact, it was just the opposite of mindless drilling, manipulation, and reflex reactions, the hallmarks of mechanistic, behaviorist instruction. On the contrary, the goals of the Oral Approach were first to gain "freedom in the use of language" and second to gain "freedom through the use of language." The belief that Fries held was that there is "no language apart from a mind active in...the mental process of clearly grasping and formulating impressions." Choice, "enlightened choice", was paramount, and the "freedom" Fries emphasized was that which "is gained when one has...a grasp on information and relationships between information." Language, in other words, "must thoroughly fit, in both denotation and suggestion, the ideas, the occasion, and the needs of the

hearers; [and] it must also be used with freedom." Language habits, as far as Fries was concerned, involved "an association between particular units of form as they occur in the stream of speech with some bundle of experience with which the units of form connect -- roughly the meaning", not responses conditioned through the "mere mechanical manipulation of 'empty' sentences that have, for the learning pupil, no real context or social meaning."

One root for this first misconception of Fries' position is found in much of the literature, particularly in the 60s. A statement by Politzer 1964, for example, rightly identifies behaviorism as one of the chief features of language instruction in the 1940s, but then is misleading in its argument that the impact of behaviorism was made through two avenues, (a) the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Intensive Language Program and subsequent Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) and (b) the University of Michigan English Language Program. Along similar lines, Moulton observed that in his "Linguistics and Language Teaching in the U.S., 1940-1960" paper he "devoted considerable space to the role that Fries played" during those two decades and "to showing that [Fries] himself thought of his innovations as applying not just to EFL but to foreign language teaching generally." Statements such as these not only demonstrate that Fries' work was incorporated in the rationale of ACLS Foreign Language programs, but also suggest it was interpreted in terms of that particular viewpoint.

Contesting this position Strain argued that at least four significant differences set the ACLS/ASTP Foreign/Modern Language programs (such as those referred to by Politzer and Moulton) apart from the Michigan EFL language program: curriculum design, instructional procedure,

concept of language, and concept of meaning. An indication that Fries perceived a distinction between the two "avenues" of instruction appears in his writing subsequent to work with the English Language Exploratory Committee (ELEC) in Japan. "A language cannot be learned in a meaning vacuum," he argued; the mastery of structures "...requires not the mere mechanical manipulation of 'empty' sentences that have, for the learning pupil, no real context or social meaning", but structures as "signals of some real meaning of which the pupils must be vividly conscious" (Fries and Fries 1961).

A part of the mechanistic/behaviorist misconception is tied to the term "audio-lingual", which officially replaced "aural-oral" at the University of Michigan in the early 60s, while Albert Marckwardt was Director of the English Language Institute. Anthony 1963, in his classic "Approach, Method, Technique" article, uses the term "aural-oral" to describe language and learning <u>assumptions</u> at the "approach" level of instruction; and points out that while both the Mim-Mem Method (ACLS/ASTP) and the Pattern Practice Method (Fries/Michigan) share the aural-oral goal of "automatic oral production coupled with skill in understanding the stream of speech", each has distinctive methodological features. In his symposium paper Anthony adds, "one cannot...infer for Fries, [that] language itself was to be defined simplistically as aural-oral" for "one can state that mastery of a language begins with aural-oral study without believing that language itself is solely aural-oral." Reflecting the distinction between approach assumptions and instructional methodology, Strain submitted that as the term "audio-lingualism" is <u>currently defined and used</u>, the Fries/Michigan Intensive English Course (Pattern Practice Method) <u>cannot</u> be considered "audio-lingual." (It

may be that "aural-oral" is the more appropriate term for Michigan's Intensive English Course, while "audio-lingual" may be more appropriate for skill-based instructional materials. (See Morley))

"Pattern Practice", the second basic issue, was addressed by Bosco. In the Michigan course "pattern practice" is considered conceptual in nature, not the discredited mechanical "pattern drills" popularized by audio-lingual Mim-Mem type instruction which degenerated into parroting, mechanical efforts to form automatic behaviorist reflexive habits. Bosco pointed out that the primary characteristics of "pattern practice" are first, the point of cognition in exercises; and second, the nature of a pattern practice procedure. He submitted that the point of cognition in grammar-focus exercises is distinctly different from the point of cognition in semantic-focus exercises; that the instruction aimed at medium-oriented instruction (grammar) and instruction aimed at message-oriented instruction (communication) function at different levels of language. Secondly, Bosco pointed out that instruction designed around a pattern practice procedure requires shifting the learner's attention away from meaning, while at the same time maintaining the context of a communication situation. In the Fries/Michigan course this is done by integrating two textbooks, SENTENCE STRUCTURE and PATTERN PRACTICE, two separate task-directed components of instruction.

Features

It appeared from the symposium papers that the original 1940s Intensive English Course at Michigan differed slightly from that of the 60s and is quite different from that of the 80s. Two of the major changes that took place occurred in instruction and in language

environment.

With regard to instruction, an important feature of the original Michigan course is found in the MANUAL FOR PATTERN PRACTICE developed by Maxine Guinn Buell. Though used during the 50s, following textbook revisions in the early 60s, the MANUAL became less and less a part of instruction. The aim of the MANUAL, important for a full understanding of the "pattern practice" concept both before and after the revisions, was to focus teacher attention on creative teaching strategies, to emphasize the communicative and functional use of language in pattern practice classes. As teaching staff changed (teaching was done mainly by field experienced teaching fellows working on graduate degrees), teaching changed, and along with that the views and understanding of Oral Approach principles changed. A pattern practice class, far from being the least demanding class to teach, was originally the one in which a teacher was given maximum freedom in using his or her creativity.

A number of other changes also occurred between the 1940s and 1980s. Student applicants shifted from predominantly Spanish speaking to a worldwide representation, student level shifted from mainly low-intermediate to intermediate, student housing changed from the English House to one of the large university dormitories, the field of linguistics went through several changes, not to mention course offerings at Michigan, and Institute Directors introduced different emphases and interests into the ELI Program.

The second crucial feature, language environment, was addressed by Robinett, who first drew attention to it in a 1949 editorial in LANGUAGE LEARNING. The Michigan Intensive Course, Robinett pointed out, included a "total functional language environment" as one of its basic

communicative and language practice components. This consisted of real-life communication situations as the out-of-class program of the students and was in great part achieved by housing both staff and students in an English House dormitory. The goal of the out-of-class activities was, in Fries' terms, to create a "vivid imaginative realization" of the language; which is to say, to relate cultural values to the language used to express those values. As Bosco and Zuck noted, the rich interactive processes of this aspect of instruction were neither fully recognized nor appreciated until efforts to transplant the Michigan Intensive Course to other institutions proved to be less than successful.

Communication, in addition to being an important part of pattern practice classes and the goal of out-of-class activities, was also the framework of the vocabulary textbook; presentations of new lexical items and practice exercises were formated as interactive communicative exchanges.

Finally, in accordance with "method" as "an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material", as Campbell observed, all the activities of the Michigan Course contextualized all of the material. The textbooks, of which there were four, the instructional materials, and the instructional program were highly integrated. For each learning-task, Structure classes focused on the task in terms of grammatical meaning, Pattern Practice classes, along with out-of-class activities, focused on it in terms of communicative meaning and usage, and vocabulary classes focused on it in terms of lexical meaning and lexical structures. That is, each learning-task was presented at three different levels of meaning and within three different types of context (grammatical,

pragmatic-communicative, and lexico-semantic).

A major consequence of this separation of curriculum into different textbooks was that attempts to replicate Michigan course results at other institutions and in other countries were generally misguided and unsuccessful. Too often only one or two parts of the course materials were adopted and the others ignored, without realizing that a single textbook represents only a small portion of the complete course of instruction. A very recent example of this type of misunderstanding is found in R. T. Bell's 1983 APPROACHES AND METHODS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING (Bateford Academic and Educational, Ltd.), where the Michigan Intensive English Course is evaluated solely on the basis of two editions of one textbook: ENGLISH SENTENCE STRUCTURE and ENGLISH SENTENCE PATTERNS.

Observations

What was the Oral Approach? Norris stated it well: "the first [approach] to seriously map out the language structures in a succession of 'micro learning tasks', not only of grammar, but [also] of phonology and lexicon"; a course of instruction for the student to "internalize.. as an integrated and constantly expanding system."

The Oral Approach was, in Fries' words, "not a 'new method', nor a set of new techniques." It was "a new understanding of the facts of language itself", a "path" to full mastery of English that emphasized production and the structural features that "constitute the signals of various meanings which a language communicates." As principles of method it emphasized contrast, accuracy, and oral practice by the learner, and as language practice stages it employed imitation, contrast, and meaning.

The main theoretical underpinnings of the Oral Approach, Anthony stated, were a descriptivist orientation resting on usage and sensitivity to usage (i.e., communicative competence), a high priority given to oral evidence, and educational effectiveness based on linguistically sound instructional materials. In addition, it drew from a wide range of other disciplines: from linguistics it drew NL and TL descriptive analyses and an ordered system of contrasts; from applied linguistics, that communication is essential to real live social situations; from applied psychology, that habits are responsible for blind spots and that analysis can pinpoint these and NL interference; from applied cultural anthropology, cultural comparisons; and from education, the systematic presentation of materials.

Compared with foreign language teaching in the U.S. before 1940, Moulton showed that the innovations established by Fries were a radical departure from previous concepts of language instruction. These occurred in two main areas: first stage goals and materials. For example, in place of reading, translating, and reciting grammar rules, Fries specified the mastery of basic linguistic units (phonology, structural patterns); in place of a focus on emotion-laden terminology, such as noun, verb, etc., he substituted neutral form classes and shifted the focus to usage and the frames that define that usage (cf. STRUCTURE OF ENGLISH).

While Fries wrote little about instructional methodology, he did endorse a set of language practice steps: imitation of a model, contrasting examples, meaningful communicative practice; and he acknowledged the usefulness of learner generalizations of significant points of contrast. He <u>did not</u> formulate a set of instructional propositions as

Bloomfield and proponents of ACLS/ASTP Mim-Mem, later Foreign/Modern Language Instruction, did: overlearning, habit formation, choral-group-row-individual drill, etc. Fries placed the burden of classroom activity on the teacher and challenged the teacher, given a highly explicite, organized and integrated set of teaching materials, to be creative and imaginative, and to be responsive to the needs, ability and capacity of individual students.

Another way to look at instruction at Michigan is to survey the teaching materials produced there over the years. As Morley pointed out, these fall into three separate categories: Intensive English Course textbooks up to the early 1960s, a series of textbooks that shifted from linguistically-oriented content-based instruction to skill-building instruction, and most recently communicative-methodology task-based instruction. The original Oral Approach course at Michigan, in other words, has evolved into several different course offerings. Lower-level students in some 'core' courses receive a blend of skill-focused instruction and integrated skills; intermediate students receive a multi-faceted syllabus that now combines functional, notional, and structural components, and features a learner-focused interactive task-based emphasis; and advanced students have the option of skill-focused, content skill-integrated, or EAP courses.

Current instructional features of the Michigan courses of instruction consider the following factors:

learners as active creators in their learning process (not passive recipients)

genuine communication

language function as well as form

the learner's language

individuality of learners and learner strategies

the intellectual involvement of learners in the learning process

a humanistic classroom and the affective dimension of language learning

special purpose language needs for particular groups of students

a learning mode that fosters creative interaction between and among learners

teachers as managers of language learning experiences (not drill-leaders and mere presenters of material)

Implications

That Oral Approach instruction has been extended in many directions, sometimes knowingly, more often unknowingly, perhaps goes without saying. It has been confused with concepts and points of view that are the opposite of its fundamental principles, some of these misunderstandings arising out of the intellectual excitement and positions of earlier days, others unfortunate attempts at trying to replicate a complete system of instruction with only the most attractive and impressive portion of the system, or at following a fashionable, bandwagon enthusiasm without a common sense evaluation of critical limitations and the requirements for successful implementation.

There are many issues that the symposium papers did not touch on. Campbell raised an important one is his discussion of modern-day Immersion Programs: How would the Oral Approach as conceived by Fries evaluate the Immersion Model? And more importantly: What would the Oral Approach have to offer in helping to resolve the problem of language learning marked by communicative success but linguistic deficiency?

The terminology issue of "acquisition" vs. "learning" in the Oral Approach was not addressed, even though Anthony's paper suggested that acquisition is the basis of Fries' position on language mastery. Bosco's position that the pattern practice instructional strategy is a shift from the focus on structure or form and medium-oriented instruction to focus on meaning and message-oriented instruction appears to support Stevick's 1982 proposal that "learning" and "acquisition" might be opposite ends of a language mastery continuum.

An embarrassing question sometimes raised in these days of empirical studies and second language acquisition research is: Where is the proof that the Oral Approach is successful in attaining language mastery? Perhaps this question more than any other reflects basic misconceptions about the Oral Approach of C. C. Fries and the tendency to lump it in with audio-lingualism disenchantment and cast it aside. The two primary innovations of the Oral Approach were that language instruction should focus on basic linguistic units and that language instruction material should be selected and arranged in accordance with sound linguistic principles, thereby creating through teaching and learning an integrated and constantly expanding language system. Surely, empirical studies should not be necessary to prove that language instruction should focus on language.

Nevertheless, the point is well taken: empirical analysis, not of the Oral Approach, but of the application of Oral Approach principles and propositions to instructional programs such as the Michigan Intensive English Course are very definitely needed, not to mention studies of where and under what circumstances the innovations of C. C. Fries continue to be recognized and used, and how they have evolved, been modified,

or been adapted in efforts at other institutions and under other circumstances to achieve efficient and effective language teaching and learning.

In other words, "Just where is the baby?"